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ABSTRACT

A Scottish study investigated qualities contributing to or detracting from an oral foreign language test's ability to test communicative competence in conversation. The study was undertaken in French, German, and Spanish second language classes in the third and fourth years of secondary school. Pupil discourse competence was assessed during verbal tests involving role-playing. Instances of pupil initiation of comments that changed the direction of the conversation were used as indicators of independent thinking, and the balance of parts played by the teacher and student was used as an indicator of equality in the conversation. Interviews with the teachers and students, made after testing, were also analyzed. Some comparisons were made between a structured test and a more open-ended version, administered to the same students, and between two administrations of the open test. Results indicate that the more open test with optional suggestions gave students more opportunity to initiate, ask questions, introduce topics, take an equal share of conversation, or change conversational direction. It was also found that student perception of the test task and teacher/interlocutor behavior were significant influences in student performance. (MSE)

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IS EQUALITY AND INDEPENDENT THINKING POSSIBLE IN AN ORAL TEST?

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports some of the findings of a research project currently in progress in the Education Department of the University of Stirling. The project team consists of Mary Kilborn, Richard Johnstone, Rosamund Michell and Diana Kent. This paper describes a small-scale action research study which looks at the effect of test design on pupil performance in a communicative oral test. In the first part of the study, a comparison between a structured and a more open test is made, from the point of view of the test's capacity to evaluate pupil ability to initiate and to take an active part in the test dialogue. The second part of the study focusses on pupil perception of the test task and its relation to pupil performance, again with respect to pupil initiation and the ability to play a directive part in the test conversation.

1. Introduction: the Scottish context

Reform of the Scottish system of assessment and certification for 16-year-olds (first recommended in the reports of the Munn and Dunning Committees in 1977) is at present underway. The new examination, entitled 'Standard Grade', is based on syllbuses at three levels (Foundation, General and Credit) and is designed for all pupils at the age of 16 (whereas the present 'Ordinary Grade' examination is intended for the more 'academic' pupils only). Performance descriptions ('Grade Related Criteria'), which form an attempt to move away from norm-referenced towards criterion-referenced assessment, have been devised for each subject to accompany the numerical grades awarded and these are at present being amended and simplified after a period of piloting in the schools.

Joint Working Parties were set up in the various subject areas to make implementation proposals based on the recommendations. The Modern Languages Joint Working Party, which first met in October 1982, published its report for French in June 1984 (the reports for German, Spanish, Italian and Russian came out in 1986). All the modern language reports have a

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number of significant features. First, there is to be an increased stress on oral skills: "The central pillar of the system is Speaking... Communication by the spoken word is of such vital importance that it must be raised to this central position, both in the assessment procedures and in the teaching processes in the classroom." Second, and as can be seen from the above quotation, the main aim in foreign language learning should be to develop communicative skills. In the words of the Report: "The syllabus and assessment arrangements have, as their primary objective, the development of communicative competence and confidence among the pupils. By this is meant the promotion of real language in real use, enabling the language learner above all to speak, listen and read in real-life situations."

In line with an increased emphasis on oral skills, the Joint Working Party recommends that 50% of the final Standard Grade mark in foreign languages be awarded for speaking. The speaking assessment is to be divided into two parts: (a) an on-going internal assessment based on normal class work and awarded by the class teacher, and (b) a final proficiency test conducted by a modern languages teacher other than the normal class teacher. The latter is to take the form of a face-to-face oral situation based on a role-play in which the pupil plays him/herself and the interlocutor one or more foreign speakers. In both the classwork and the final oral test, the report states: "It is considered to be of prime importance that candidates should be able to take part in conversations involving the exchange of information, whether this be in a personal, social or a more transactional-tourist context and that they should be able to respect the basic social conventions that these situations involve." It is hoped, therefore, that the test conversation will mirror, as closely as possible, a natural real-life conversation.

2. The research project

This paper will present some of the findings of a modern languages research project currently being carried out in the Education Department of the University of Stirling. The project, funded by the Scottish Education Department and running from November 1984 to October 1987, is entitled "The School-based assessment of Communicative Foreign-language Skills in Secondary Classes 3 and 4". Its main aims are (i) to develop a set of criteria for the assessment of pupils' communicative performance; (ii) to develop guidelines for the consistent administration by teachers of oral interview tasks, and (iii) to study the place of formative assessment

in 'communicative' instructional strategies at intermediate level. The research strategy involves a series of small-scale action research studies involving collaboration between the research team and teacher of French, German and Spanish in S3 and S4 classes (ie. 14-16-year-old pupils) in secondary schools in central Scotland.

The framework of foreign language communicative competence used by the research team is that proposed by Canale (1983), a further development of the one first put forward by Canale and Swain (1980). Canale identifies four major components of communicative competence: (1) grammatical competence (including phonology, orthography, vocabulary, word and sentence formation); (2) sociolinguistic competence (expression and understanding of social meanings appropriate to different sociolinguistic contexts, and of grammatical forms appropriate for their expression); (3) discourse competence (knowledge of how to combine grammatical forms and meanings to achieve a unified text); (4) strategic competence (ways of coping with grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and performance difficulties). These four dimensions have been taken by the research team as a basis for developing an instrument which can be used for the analysis of pupil performance. This paper will concentrate mainly on pupil discourse competence.

3. Equality and independent thinking in the oral tests

It has been stated that the final proficiency oral test aims to test the pupil's ability to use "real language" in "real-life situations". It is for this reason that role-play has been chosen as the test context. The fact that testees keep their own identities while testers adopt new ones idicates an attempt to make it appear that both partners take on an equal role during the test conversation. Indeed, it is quite clearly stated in the recommended Grade-Related Criteria that the testee be judged on his skills not only as a responder but as an initiator. By initiation is meant the changing or controlling of the direction of the conversation, as opposed to merely responding to questions or comments put by the interlocutor. For the purposes of the present paper, instances of pupil initiation during the oral test will be taken as indications of 'independent thinking'. 'Equality' will refer to the balance (or lack thereof) between the parts played by each conversation participant during the test role-play.

4. The study - Part 1

The remainder of this paper will present some of the findings of one of the small-scale action research studies undertaken during the course of the project. When the study began, the focus was on test design. At the point when the researchers joined the foreign languages department of one school (December 1984), the teachers were in the process of adapting the role-play test of the previous year (December 1983) for use in the imminent end-of-term French oral examination. The role-play situation was to remain the same (a cafe in Brittany) but the rather open conversation, consisting of a series of suggestions for the pupils, was to be replaced by a set of five specific tasks (see Table 1). The reasons given by the teachers for the change were that, although the test went well the year before, they feared that this year's pupils would not manage it as well. Also, both pupils and teachers would welcome more guidelines in the test. Two teachers who had S3 classes (third year secondary) agreed to record their tests on one of the testing days in order that pupil performance in the new more structured test be analysed. In December 1984, recordings were made of 10 pupils (six with Teacher A and four with Teacher B).

4.1. Teacher interviews

Teachers were interviewed after the tests using a semi-structured interview in order to register their impressions of the more structured 1984 test compared with the more open test of the previous year. Both teachers were in agreement that the more structured test had not gone as well as they had hoped (they used words such as "limited", "uninteresting" and "flat"). It had seemed far less like a "normal conversation" compared with the 1983 test; there had been an awkwardness and lack of flow as pupils moved rigidly from one utterance to another. The teachers also pointed out that one of the greatest problems had been to make pupils use their imaginations and to take the initiative. This, they explained, had been the reason for their having wanted to revert to a more structured test; yet, in this case at least, the test had not helped.

Table 1. The role-paly situations in the French oral examination

A. More 'open' test (December 1983)

Your teacher is a French friend whom you meet
while on holiday at the sea-side in Brittany.
You go to a cafe together. Talk French together.

Greet her.
Ask how she is, if she likes the place.
Call the waiter. Order a drink for yourself.
Ask your friend if she wants an ice-cream or
a pancake.
Order whatever she wants.
Ask what activities she does during the day and
in the evening.
Say what YOU do.
Comment on the weather.
Suggest something you could do together later.
Arrange a time and a place to meet.

These are suggestions only. You may wish to add,
or ask for more information.

B. More "structured" test (December 1984)

Your teacher will play the part of a young
French girl whom you have met while on
holiday in Brittany.
You go to a cafe together and talk French
with one another.

Suggest going to a cafe.
Ask if she would like an icecream or pancake.
Ask what she does during the day and evening.
Suggest something you could do together.
Arrange a time and place to meet.

You should give and ask for information to complete
the tasks below.

4.2. Another batch of tests

It was agreed to give the same pupils the more open test to see if (a) they could cope with it after all, and (b) to see if it led to any improvement in their performance. This was done after a period of two months had elapsed (February/March 1985). The results were analysed and, for the purposes of the present paper, we shall be looking at areas which concern the pupils' ability to take charge of at least parts of the conversation.

4.3. The results

Table 2 shows instances of pupils asking questions in both the more open and then the more structured oral test. It can be seen that there is in fact very little significant difference between pupil performance in this area in the two tests. This was the case with the tests of both Teacher A and Teacher B. Eight out of the ten pupils asked almost the same number of questions, one pupil (Pupil 6) asked significantly more, another (Pupil 5) asked significantly fewer. It would appear that, in this instance at least, the 'opening up' of the test did little to increase pupil willingness or ability to pose questions in the foreign language.

Table 3 relates to certain areas of the discourse: number of topics covered in the test conversation, control of topics, instances of pupil initiation and pupil speech turns (instances of pupil speech turns which consist only of "yes" or "no", or of a non-lexical utterance, eg. "eh" are also shown). In the case of Teacher A it can be seen that there was a slight increase in the number of topics covered in the test conversation in the more open oral test. There was also a slight increase in the number of topics opened or introduced by the pupils. Indeed, in this more open test, pupils opened a higher proportion of the topics, showing that they could be encouraged to take a more directive part in the conversation. There was also an increase in instances of pupil initiation (in some cases quite a big increase with Pupil 3 moving from 6 to 12 and Pupil 4 going from 15 to 22). This could perhaps be explained to some extent by the increase in the length of test dialogue (the number of pupil speech turns is higher in every case) but, nevertheless, the test did show an increase in instances of pupil initiation, which, according to the criteria, is an improvement in

Table 2. Instances of pupil questions in oral test (French)

PUPIL	December 1984 (structured test)						March 1984 (open test)					
	Inversion	Intonation	Question Word	Interrogative Structure	Combination of any of the former	TOTAL	Inversion	Intonation	Question Word	Interrogative Structure	Combination of any of the former	TOTAL
(Teacher A)												
1.		5	1		1	7		5		1	1	7
2.		6	1		2	9		6		1	1	8
3.		6			1	7		5	1		1	7
4.		10	2		1	13		9			3	13
5.		3	1		1	5		1		1		1
6.		6	1		1	8		11	1		1	13
(Teacher B)												
7.		3	1		1	5		4			1	5
8.		3			2	5		3			1	4
9.		4	2		2	8		5	1		1	7
10.		5			1	6		3	1	1	1	6

Table 3. Pupil discourse competence in oral tests (French)

PUPIL	December 1984 (structured oral test)							March 1985 (more open oral test)						
	Total number of topics	No. of times topics opened	No. of times topics opened by pupil	No. of instances of pupil initiation	No. of pupil speech turns	No. of "yes/no" pupil speech turns	No. of non-lexical pupil speech turns	Total number of topics	No. of times topics opened	No. of times topics opened by pupil	No. of instances of pupil initiation	No. of pupil speech turns	No. of "yes/no" pupil speech turns	No. of non-lexical pupil speech turns
(Teacher A)														
1.	4	5	1	5	27	5	-	4	5	4	11	33	6	2
2.	4	4	3	10	22	3	-	5	7	5	10	31	6	1
3.	3	5	2	6	17	3	-	4	5	3	12	29	4	-
4.	5	9	5	15	37	4	-	6	7	6	22	49	4	-
5.	3	3	3	6	23	6	-	6	9	3	7	45	16	-
6.	4	6	4	11	22	6	-	4	6	5	12	53	8	-
(Teacher B)														
7.	3	3	2	5	18	2	1	7	7	3	8	45	3	1
8.	3	3	3	5	21	-	-	8	9	5	6	44	4	-
9.	3	3	3	7	20	3	1	8	11	6	10	54	5	3
10.	3	3	3	5	16	1	1	6	10	5	11	38	3	-

pupil performance. The number of "yes" or "no" speech turns was slightly higher (expept in the case of Pupil 5, who got into difficulties) in the more open test. However, the number relative to the total number of pupil speech turns was not as high, showing that the opening up of the test need not necessarily lead to an increase in monosyllabic utterances on the part of the pupil.

In the case of pupil performance in the tests conducted by Teacher B, the changes were more marked. This teacher had taken a very rigid line in the more structured test, hurrying pupils through the bare minimum. The dialogues had tended to be shorter than those of Teacher A, in particular the range of topics covered was more limited. There were fewer pupil initiations, although the amount was quite high for the length of test. The effect of the more open test on this teacher and her pupils was a marked increase in the number of topics covered, although the ratio of topics opened by pupils was not as high as with Teacher A. Nevertheless pupils were opening about half the topics in the dialogue, which can certainly be considered a form of 'equality'. The instances of pupil initiation has also increased, although again not proportionate to the large increase in speech turns. The number of pupil "yes" or "no" speech turns is again up, although here it is in proportion to the increase in pupil speech turns. Again, with Teacher B, the opening up of the dialogue has not lead to an increase in pupil monosyllabic responses.

In conclusion it can be stated that, despite the limitations of the test task, there was nevertheless an increase in the number and range of topics and also a higher number of instances of pupil initiation. Pupils had shown themselves capable of introducing topics and introducing ideas of their own; they were learning to take a more "equal" share of the test conversation and showing signs of being able to think for themselves.

4.4. Pupil interviews

The pupils were all interviewed individually immediately after the February/March tests using a semi-structured interview, in order to record any views they may have on the two tests. Pupil responses were very varied and showed no clear pattern. This was the first time these pupils had attempted a more open test and in terms, for example, of level of difficulty descriptions ranged from "hard" to "easy". As to whether they preferred the former more structured test or the recent more open tests (such

descriptors were not given to the pupils), views ranged from being much happier with set tasks to preferring "having a go" and "trying to keep the conversation going". Most of the pupils were unsure as to whether they had managed to bring in ideas of their own or not. It would appear that pupils needed to have more practice and a familiarity with both types of test before being able to make judgements or draw comparisions.

4.5. Teacher interviews

The teachers declared themselves to be happier with the more open test. They felt it was nearer to a natural conversation and flowed better. They admitted that it showed that the pupils were capable of more than they had realized (they had, after all, designed the more structured test because they felt these pupils could not manage this one). The conclusion on the part of these teachers was that a more open test task with optional suggestions was preferable to one with set tasks.

5. The study - Part Two

Nevertheless, the teachers were of the opinion that improvements could still be made. There were still occasions during the February/March open tests when they felt they were directing the conversation and the choice of topics when the pupils could well be doing so. If the pupils were to be scored on their skills at initiating, then it was vital that they be given space to do so as much as possible.

It was decided to continue the study during the following school year (1985-86) in order to see if further improvements could be made in pupil ability to take an equal share of the conversation and to introduce their own ideas. Teachers very much wanted to keep to the more open test with its optional suggestions as they felt this test had shown more potential in giving results in the area of pupil initiation. The modern languages department therefore decided to make the December 1985 test an open one. They agreed that the research team should work with two different teachers (Teachers C and D) and also, this time, with two languages (French and German). The pupils would be different as the study was working with S3 and a new school year had begun. All the end-of-term oral tests

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in two S3 classes were to be recorded and 10 in each chosen at random for analysis thus doubling the number of tests analysed.

It was agreed to introduce into the test task explicit instructions to the pupil that he/she ask questions and take charge of the conversation at least part of the time. The precise wording was: "These are suggestions only. You will gain a better mark if you are prepared to ask questions and direct the conversation yourself. Try to take charge of the conversation at least some of the time and do not simply answer questions".

The instructions and the role-play situation with its optional suggestions were given to the students a few days in advance to prepare (for the French test, the conversation was situated on a beach, for the German it was situated in a shop). As usual, the pupils were to play themselves, the teacher a French/German teenager. The tests were carried out and recorded in December 1985. Teachers were interviewed individually after the tests, using a semi-structured interview.

5.1. Teacher interviews

Both teachers declared themselves very encouraged by the pupils efforts but they too commented that they had talked too much during the test dialogue. Pupils were initiating but teacher nevertheless found themselves asking questions and making comments to keep the conversation going. Their listening to the recordings of the tests confirmed them in the view that they should perhaps hold back more and not be concerned about silences developing.

5.2. Another batch of tests

The teachers suggested conducting another test using the same pupils. This time, care was to be taken to ensure that pupils had a clear idea as to what was expected of them. This was to be achieved by not only the writing of explicit instructions into the test (as in December 1985) but by the teacher monitoring her verbal instructions to the pupils. In addition, teachers agreed to make a deliberate effort to hold back during the test conversation, ie. not to pick up pupil points and take over but to sit back and allow the pupils to elaborate.

The teachers prepared the pupils by explaining that they were going to play the part of a very taciturn person whom the pupils were trying to engage in conversation. Again the test task (with situation, suggestions and instructions) was given to the pupils a few days in advance (the role-play situation in both tests was identical, set in a train). The new batch of tests was recorded in March 1986 and analyses have been done on 10 of each class. Again, the focus of the analysis was upon instances of pupil questioning and also upon areas of discourse (eg. topic control, pupil initiation), the aim again being to consider the part played by the pupil in the test conversation.

5.3. The results

Table 4 shows instances of pupil questions in the French oral test, Table 5 instances of pupil questions in the German oral test. In both cases there is a marked increase on the part of most pupils, suggesting that it helped not only to include the instructions in the test task but also to point this out clearly to the pupil in verbal instructions. The teacher holding back from asking questions herself may also have been a factor. (It is interesting to note the differences in question formation in the two languages, but that is not the concern of this paper).

More significant, however, are the changes in the discourse pattern (see Tables 6 and 7). The number of topics moved away from the uniform pattern of the December 1985 tests (especially in the French tests) and instances of pupil opening of topics was proportionately far higher in both language. There was also a significant rise in instances of pupil initiation, giving some of the highest numbers of instances incountered during this research project.

It is interesting to note that in the majority of the interviews there was a marked drop in the number of speech turns. This was because the pupils took advantage of their 'equal' right to bring the test dialogue to a conclusion when they had had enough. There was a considerable drop in the number of "yes" and "no" speech in both languages, especially in the French test, suggesting that the teachers were successful in modifying their behaviour and avoiding asking a series of questions.

Table 4. Instances of pupil questions in oral tests (French)

Pupil	December 1985 (pupil initiation encouraged)						March 1986 (pupil-initiation stressed)					
	Inversion	Intonation	Question Word	Interrogative Structure	Combination of any of the former	TOTAL	Inversion	Intonation	Question Word	Interrogative Structure	Combination of any of the former	TOTAL
1.		8	1			9		5			5	10
2.		2				2		5	2		6	13
3.		4	1		4	9		6			8	15
4.		3				3		4			3	7
5.		2			2	4	1	10			5	18
6.		6			1	7		6			7	13
7.		6			3	9		4		2	5	11
8.		1			2	3		3			7	10
9.		1				1		3			2	5
10.		2				2		5			3	8

Table 5. Instances of pupil questions in oral tests (German)

December 1985 (pupil initiation encouraged) March 1986 (pupil initiation stressed)

Pupil	Inversion	Intonation	Question word	Interrogative Structure	Combination of any of the former	TOTAL	Inversion	Intonation	Question word	Interrogative Structure	Combination of any of the former	TOTAL
1.					2	2	1	1			7	9
2.	3				3	6	5	3	1		2	11
3.					1	1	3				4	7
4.	7		1		3	11	6				5	11
5.	2	1			2	5	3	3			9	15
6.					-	0	3	1			6	10
7.		3			1	4	4				10	14
8.	2				1	3	5	2			6	13
9.	1				-	1	5	3			9	17
10.	1	2			3	6	5	2			11	19

Table 6. Pupil discourse competence in oral tests (French)

Pupil	December 1985 (pupil initiation encouraged)							March 1986 (pupil initiation stressed)						
	Total number of topics	No. of times topics opened	No. of times topics opened by pupils	No of instances of pupil initiation	No. of pupil speech turns	No. of "yes/no" pupil speech turns	No. of non-lexical speech turns	Total number of topics	No. of times topics opened	No. of times topics opened by pupils	No of instances of pupil initiation	No. of pupil speech turns	No. of "yes/no" pupil speech turns	No. of non-lexical speech turns
1.	4	4	1	4	32	4	4	4	4	4	17	20	1	1
2.	4	6	1	3	37	18	-	5	5	5	20	25	1	1
3.	4	8	6	10	35	1	1	5	6	6	22	29	-	-
4.	4	6	0	3	37	18	1	3	3	3	17	26	3	-
5.	4	6	2	6	34	8	3	7	8	7	27	46	5	2
6.	4	5	2	5	29	9	-	3	3	3	17	16	-	1
7.	4	4	2	7	26	7	-	4	4	4	13	17	-	-
8.	4	4	2	3	23	3	-	5	6	3	19	33	-	3
9.	4	4	1	2	23	4	2	3	3	2	5	11	-	1
10.	4	4	0	2	34	16	-	4	4	4	10	13	-	1

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Table 7. Pupil discourse competence in oral tests (German)

Pupil	December 1985 (pupil initiation encouraged)							March 1986 (pupil initiation stressed)						
	Total number of topics	No. of times topics opened	No. of times topics opened by pupil	No. of instances of pupil initiation	No. of pupil speech turns	No. of "yes/no" pupil speech turns	No. of non-lexical pupil speech turns	Total number of topics	No. of times topics opened	No. of times topics opened by pupils	No. of instances of pupil initiation	No. of pupil speech turns	No. of "yes/no" pupil speech turns	No. of non-lexical pupil speech turns
1.	4	6	3	2	33	5	-	3	3	3	9	18	2	-
2.	6	6	2	6	59	9	4	4	5	5	8	36	1	-
3.	3	3	1	1	34	9	2	5	6	4	11	26	3	-
4.	4	7	3	9	49	15	-	4	7	4	22	46	5	4
5.	3	6	1	9	52	8	-	5	5	5	22	50	-	-
6.	4	4	1	-	26	11	-	2	2	2	7	19	3	-
7.	4	6	1	4	42	13	1	4	4	4	24	40	9	-
8.	5	5	-	2	39	11	1	6	6	4	18	36	-	2
9.	3	4	1	4	44	15	2	9	12	7	27	76	15	4
10.	5	7	1	6	48	14	1	8	11	8	26	47	5	1

5.4. Post-test interviews

In the interviews after the March tests, the pupils showed that they had a high level of awareness of what had been expected of them, ie. they were to try to take charge of the conversation and ask questions themselves. The teachers declared themselves well pleased with the results. As far as they were concerned, pupils had proved that they could play a very active and directive role in the test conversation. They commented that the dialogue had perhaps lost a little in authenticity, in that they, the teachers, had held back more than they would have done in a natural situation of conversation. They thought that that was a small price to pay in the light of the pupil performance.

6. Conclusion

The present study set out to consider pupil performance in relation to test task and Part 1 resulted in the teachers in the school in question coming to a definite conclusion as to the test task they found most suitable. They found that the more open test with optional suggestions gave pupils a better opportunity to initiate, ask questions, introduce topics or, in the terms of the present paper, to take an 'equal' share of conversation direction and show signs of 'independent thinking'.

However, when this type of test was tried out the following year with different teachers, it was discovered that there were factors to consider other than test task. Two that were focussed on in Part II of the study, were pupil perception of the task and teacher/interlocutor behaviour. When these were monitored and influenced, results were vastly improved in terms of pupils playing an active part in the conversation and introducing ideas of their own. Whereas it must be recognised that tester and testee can never in reality have 'equal' roles in a test dialogue and that pupils will also to a certain extent be limited by the test task especially at this level (the French pupils were in their third year of French, the German pupils their second year), it has been encouraging to observe pupils improving their performance in terms of one aspect of the criteria by which they are to be judged.

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